

“The Tower of Babel”

Genesis 11:1-9

May 14, 2023

6th Sunday of Easter

Pr. Josh Anderson

This morning, we continue in our series in Genesis, looking at Genesis 11:1-9. The text is printed on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along there.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word. It is more to be desired than gold; even much fine gold. It is sweeter also than honey; sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb.

*1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth." 5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 6 And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

Today we wrap up our sermon series on the primeval history in Genesis. The next two Sundays, Pastor Jeff will preach on the Ascension of our Lord Jesus, and then on the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Then, on the first Sunday in June, we will return to the psalter, picking up where we left off last summer with Psalm 64.

Throughout this sermon series, I've been arguing that these early chapters of Genesis give us the true history of the world.

What I mean by that is not only that these events — the murder of Abel, the city building of Cain, the global flood, the Ark, etc., really took place - though they certainly did, but that these stories are recorded for us because they give us the truth about the human story, and who it is that we are as a human race, living in this world under God's rule and presence.

In other words, these stories in the first chapters of Genesis are not so much given to us primarily that we could apply them our individual lives (though certainly they have application), but primarily they are given to us so that we might understand the grand movements of history throughout the ages, and the way in which God is at work in our world today.

That is to say, these stories are given to us because they are meant to set patterns for all the stories to come — the stories we read in the rest of the Scriptures, the stories we read in history textbooks, and the stories we read in the newspapers today.

In other words, the story of Cain and Abel is given to us as a picture of the jealousy and violence that the wicked will always have toward the righteous — as the Apostle John would write, some four thousand years after these events took place: *“And why did Cain murder Abel? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you.”*

In like manner, the story of God's judgment of the world by the flood is picture of all of God's judgments throughout history — a foreshadowing of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, of Israel's cleansing of the land of Canaan after the Exodus, of God's destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the armies of Babylon, and so on, all the way up to the judgment that our Lord Jesus will bring on the last day.

But, in a similar way, the Ark is a picture of how God will always preserve his people through judgment — how he will always protect and deliver those who belong to him — how, even in death, he is with them to save.

And so our story this morning in the Tower of Babel narrative is a picture of how God responds to pride and hubris of humanity — not only in this particular story, but throughout history, as God again and again tears down civilizations and cities opposed to his reign.

Here's how our passage today begins:

*1 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. 2 And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. 3 And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. 4 Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth."*

The tower of Babel story takes place about 150 years or so after the flood. All of humanity has one language at this time because God had reduced the human race to eight people in the flood, and all of their descendants shared the same tongue.

Now, it's important to state that what takes place in this story does not involve the whole of the human race at this time. It's not as though all of humanity at this time gathered together to build the Tower of Babel.

No, this is a portion of Noah's descendants who are involved in this story — in particular, they are the descendants of Ham, the son who rebelled against Noah by looking on his nakedness and telling his brothers about it.

Genesis 10 tells us in verses 8-10, *"Cush [the son of Ham] fathered Nimrod; he was the first on earth to be a mighty man. 9 He was a mighty hunter before the LORD. Therefore it is said, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter before the LORD.' 10 The beginning of his kingdom was Babel, Erech, Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar."*

Nimrod was the grandson of Ham, and we know from Genesis 10 that he founded his kingdom in the land of Shinar, and it was called Babel.

In other words, the tower of Babel story is not about all of humanity joining together and building a tower to heaven.

Rather, it is about a specific portion of the human race, a wicked group of people led by Nimrod, who was following his grandfather in his sin of rebellion, joining together to do these things.

Remember that God had commanded Noah and his descendants to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.

But Nimrod and those who gather with him on the plain in the land of Shinar refuse to be dispersed, they refuse to go out and fill the earth.

Instead, they determine to stay in one place and build a city, with a tower with its top in the heavens, thereby making name for themselves.

So what is going on with this tower? What are these people trying to achieve, and why does God object to what they doing?

I think it's clear that this tower that was built on the plain of Shinar had religious connotations.

The history of pagan religions is full of ziggurats, human constructed towers that are meant to reach up into the heavens, and provide a way for man to commune with God on his own terms — and it seems that this is the intention here in Genesis 11.

Nimrod and his followers seek to make their name great, they seek to literally elevate themselves to gain equal standing with God.

Remember, in the garden, the serpent deceived Adam and Eve by promising that if they ate of the fruit of the tree, they would be like God, and here, human beings are re-enacting that desire, seeking to make a way to climb to heaven by their own effort, their own work.

Augustine points out that, taking place as this story did so closely after the flood, it is possible that one of the motivations of the builders of the tower was to protect themselves against God's future judgment — they meant to build a tower that was so tall that God, if he sent another flood, would not be able to drown it in water.

One of the fascinating things about the Tower of Babel is the powerful unity and cooperation that was created by those who led this endeavor.

And indeed, the Tower of Babel is paradigmatic of all efforts that humanity has made throughout the centuries to establish their own greatness, to make a name for themselves, to build something that will reach even into the heavens itself.

When we read of the Tower of Babel, we should imagine all the great civilizations of the world that would follow — Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, the Aztecs, Rome, etc., even up into our modern times.

Each of these empires gathered people together and gave them a common objective, a common vision for order and virtue and honor.

The church father Chrysostom comments on the link between the Tower of Babel and humanity's eternal lust for power and pride and strength through the ages (and remember, he wrote these words 1600 years ago).

He writes: *"Notice how the human race, instead of managing to keep its own boundaries, always longs for more and reaches out for greater things. This is what the human race has in its common story, not being prepared to recognize the limitations of its own condition but always lusting after more, entertaining ambitions beyond its capacity."*

But how does God respond to this city on the plain of Shinar? What does he do in response to the tower they are building to the heavens? In verses 5-9, we read:

*5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. 6 And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. 7 Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." 8 So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. 9 Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*

The beginning of this section is meant to be a little bit funny, I think. Nimrod and his followers mean to build a tower to the heavens, but they're not anywhere close to achieving their goal. The LORD has to "come down" to see what they're building.

And when the Lord sees what they are doing, what the children of man are doing, he frustrates their ambitions by confusing their languages and making their cooperation impossible — thus forcing them to do as he had intended — to disperse and fill the earth.

What the Lord is doing here is communicating something important to the human race.

What he is saying is that all human efforts to build something great on our own terms will ultimately be defeated and thwarted by God.

And the rest of human history bears this out. Great civilizations have been built, yes. Great leaders have arisen, yes. But always, without fail, they have fallen and collapsed and melted away.

And understood Biblically, we can say that all great human civilizations, all great human projects of cooperation have fallen not because of “natural” causes, but because God has frustrated their ambitions, God has weakened their foundations, God has intervened to thwart their efforts and disperse their power.

But this is not all that the Tower of Babel story teaches us.

Here, in this chapter, Genesis 11, we have this striking picture of how God places limits on human power, how he intentionally disperses and weakens the human race.

But fascinatingly, in the very next chapter, Genesis 12, we are told that God will gather into one that same human race which he has dispersed.

But he will do it on his terms, not ours.

In Genesis 12, God calls Abraham and he says, *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”*

In Genesis 11, Nimrod and his followers seek to make their own name great through their efforts. In Genesis 12, God says to Abraham, *“I will make your name great”* — God will do it, not Abraham.

In Genesis 11, God disperses the human race and scatters them to the corners of the globe. But in Genesis 12, God begins to lay the groundwork for a plan to gather the human race again, and bless them through his Son, the one who would be an offspring of Abraham, and the inheritor of all these promises.

Indeed, the Day of Pentecost, our New Testament reading this morning, is the ultimate reversal of Babel.

When Jesus, the offspring of Abraham, ascends into heaven, he pours out his Holy Spirit, and it is by means of this Spirit that the confusion of languages is miraculously healed — suddenly, all the nations gathered in Jerusalem can hear Peter's sermon about the good news of the crucified and risen Son of God in their own language.

You see, the miracle that happens at Pentecost is not just an arbitrary sign of the Spirit's presence and power — it is an undoing of Babel, and a sign that God is now ready to call the human race together again, united in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.

And indeed, that is just what has been happening now in this world, for two thousand years.

The empires and cities of the world have risen and fallen, each one struck down in the end by God, each one frustrated in their ambitions and plans. None of them have lasted, none have stood the test of time.

And yet, the church's growth has been continuous. It has not been flashy. It has not been without its difficulties.

It is, as our Lord said, like a seed that a man planted in the ground that grows into a great tree.

It is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, until it was all leavened.

It is, as the apostle Peter says, like a house built with living stones, with the risen Christ as its cornerstone, being built into a dwelling place for God.

So do not be afraid, beloved, when the men of this world gather their strength and build their towers and make their boasts.

They will be dispersed, they will be frustrated, they will fail.

For he who sits in the heavens; the Lord holds them in the derision.

But he has set his King on Zion, on his holy hill.

And the city that he builds will last forever.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.